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# PEREGRINATIONS

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## Photo Essay: Westminster Abbey: Exploring an Extraordinary Building in Extraordinary Times

LUKE CORING

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Over the centuries, Westminster Abbey has played many roles. For the Saxons it was a small monastery, called St Peter's Abbey. Built on a marshy area called Thorney Island, it was rebuilt in the Romanesque style by Edward the Confessor in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. For the Normans, it was the site of the Conqueror's coronation and his attempts to legitimize his reign, while London burned and rioted outside during the ceremony. In the Plantagenet era, it was the center of the cult of Edward the Confessor - the ineffectual monarch having



been elevated to sainthood during the reign of Henry II. Having survived the wholesale destruction that befell other monastic centers during the Reformation it remained the center of royal pageantry, before settling at its current situation, which could, perhaps uncharitably, be





described as a tourist attraction (with eye-watering entrance fees) that performs ecclesiastic duties with the odd nationally significant marriage or funeral thrown in for good measure.

My own relationship with the Abbey has been somewhat mixed. I visited for the first time in 2014, queuing for almost an hour to get in, and felt somewhat dragged around the building by the current of countless other tourists, unable

to spend the time I wanted in each area and feeling so unfulfilled when the throng deposited me outside that I took a tube to the other side of London to visit Temple Church. Though Westminster Abbey's "no photography" rule was very strictly enforced, the handful of defiant snaps I took in the cloister, chapter house and Pyx Chapel served as pretty much the only parts of my trip that I remembered.

So, when I found out in October 2020 that photographs were now allowed, I vowed to return as soon as I was able. With the announcement of a second Covid lockdown in England starting 5th November I decided to visit on 3rd November, the last opening day, and hoped that



the very unfortunate general circumstances would give me the opportunity of a lifetime for a unique experience at the Abbey.

Entering via the north transept I had about 10 minutes to look around before having to traverse the crossing to the south transept for my pre-booked trip to the galleries. I was immediately captivated by the view of the south rose window through the crossing. For the first impression of the Abbey it was as spectacular as the architects intended.

The north transept is flanked with large and somewhat pompous memorials, mostly to heroes of the Empire and Victorian politicians. Being the main point of ingress, it was also the busiest part of the Abbey, but nothing I saw there compelled me to linger for too long. Looking up, I was struck by the intricate ceiling, with paintings dating from Christopher Wren's renovations of 1697.



As I did a 360 to try to soak up the building and assuage the overwhelming feelings that can come with being in such a place, that has in many ways been specifically designed to shock and awe, I noticed some wonderful but very damaged reliefs in the spandrels above the entrance



including this Samson and the lion which has suffered the depredations of time, if not Iconoclasm.



Visiting the galleries unsurprisingly carries an extra premium, but is well worth it for many reasons, though this is a part of the Abbey where the photography ban is still enforced.

There are treasures here from many periods in the Abbey's history; for medievalists there is some excellent stained glass, capitals, and wonderful illuminated manuscripts such as the beautiful *Liber Regalis*, and funeral effigies including Torrigiano's haunting bust of Henry VII.





But the real reason to come up to the gallery is for the unrivalled views. The windows provide a breathtaking perspective of the flying buttresses and fantastical creatures adorning the exterior of the Henry VII chapel, but the piece de resistance is the views it affords of the interior areas that you cannot visit at ground level, namely the Presbytery, high altar and Confessor's Chapel. There was no way I could miss the chance to bag a couple of illicit photographs which I will discuss a little more later on.



First is the Presbytery, with its unique mosaic floor and excellent Gothic effigies, and the second photograph shows the gilded effigy of Henry III, who instigated the rebuilding of the Abbey in its current style during the mid-thirteenth century.







Descending back to the south transept I found myself in Poet's Corner, where a surfeit of memorials to literary figures has radiated around the highly impressive final resting place of Geoffrey Chaucer. In 1556 a tomb was erected to Chaucer, who died in 1400, and his bones were transferred from their original position at the entrance of the chapel of St Benedict.

The craftsmanship is of excellent quality and it has been suggested that this tomb was purchased from one of the London churches that Henry VIII had dissolved. The design is similar to the tomb for Jane Guildford, Duchess of Northumberland (d 1555) at Chelsea Old Church so if this was the case, the previous occupant would certainly not have been inside for long.



Next to the somewhat nondescript 1740 memorial to Shakespeare is a pair of fine medieval wall paintings, thought to be by Walter of Durham, painter to Henry III and Edward I. They were 'rediscovered' in 1934 having been obscured for two centuries by memorials. The better-preserved image on the left shows The Incredulity of St Thomas.









Moving into the south ambulatory I was entering “royal territory.” A small portion of the rear of Anne of Cleves’ memorial is visible; the main part of the tomb in the Presbytery now serves as a very handy table to place candles and flowers during royal weddings.

On the outer ambulatory wall is a beautifully decorated chest, the top of which was inlaid with mosaics in the Cosmatesque style, though few now remain. Very little is known for certain as to the function of this chest - is it a tomb or an altar? If a tomb, for whom? The official story is that it was originally the final resting place of Katherine, daughter of Henry III, and that the remains of other children of Henry III and Edward I were subsequently interred, but this is certainly up for debate.





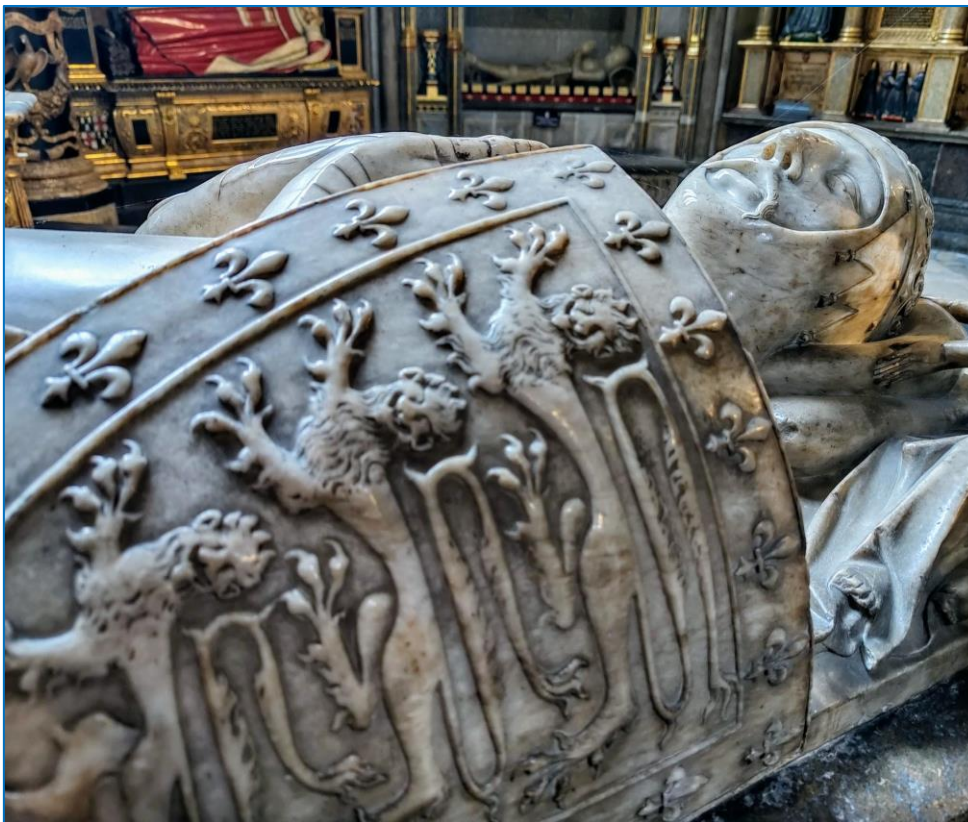
The chapel of Edward the Confessor houses many royal tombs, the most visually striking on the south side being that of the great warrior Edward III. Six of his children are depicted in the niches, Lionel of Antwerp, Joan de la Tour, Edward the Black Prince, Edmund of Langley, Mary Duchess of Brittany and William of Hatfield. Edward's six other legitimate children would have been on the other side of the tomb, but none remain.

A number of chapels radiate from the ambulatory, unfortunately they were all closed for access due to the pandemic. There were opportunities to take photographs into the chapels from the outside, but in many cases I would have loved to get a little closer.





The Chapel of St Edmund and St Thomas contains many fine tombs and memorials for members of the royal family. William de Valence was the half-brother of Henry III from his mother Isabella of Angoulême's second marriage. Though constructed mainly of oak, his effigy is very high quality. It is copper-plated and decorated in Limoges enamel, the only example of this technique on a memorial in England.



Another royal brother in this chapel is John of Eltham, younger brother of Edward III who died aged 20 in 1336 while campaigning against the Scots. His alabaster effigy is certainly that of a warrior, who was trusted to be 'Guardian of the Realm' when Edward was out of the country. The Fleurs-de-lys on John's shield are a reference to his French descent through his mother

Queen Isabella, daughter of the French king Philip IV, as Edward did not officially claim to be king of France until 1340.



The gap between one of the great cylindrical columns that surround the Confessor's Chapel, and the somewhat vandalized tomb of Edward III's queen, Philippa of Hainault, gives perhaps the best view of the shrine of St Edward the Confessor from ground level. Though it has lost most of the stunning decoration that once covered it, the fact that it has survived at all is testament to the monks of the Abbey, who dismantled and hid the shrine before it could be destroyed in the Reformation. It was reassembled during the Marian Restoration and thankfully escaped the attention of Cromwell's Puritans a century later.

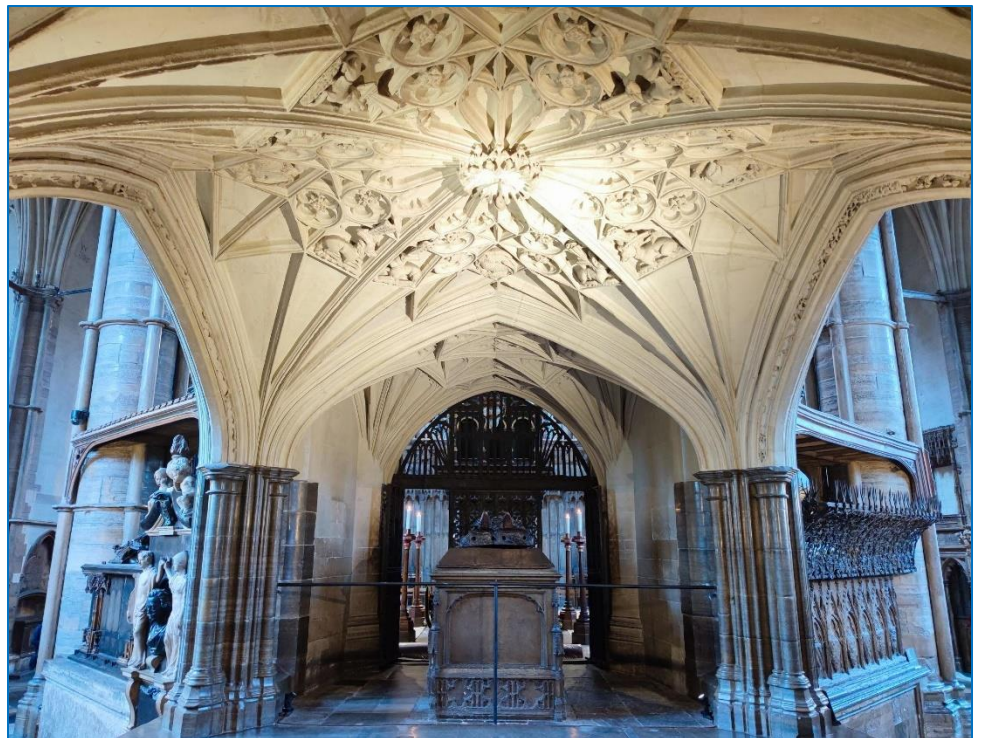






At the apex of the ambulatory is the tomb of Henry V, situated beneath his mezzanine chantry chapel. The chapel's exterior is decorated with some well-preserved reliefs including one of Henry himself, mounted on a war horse.

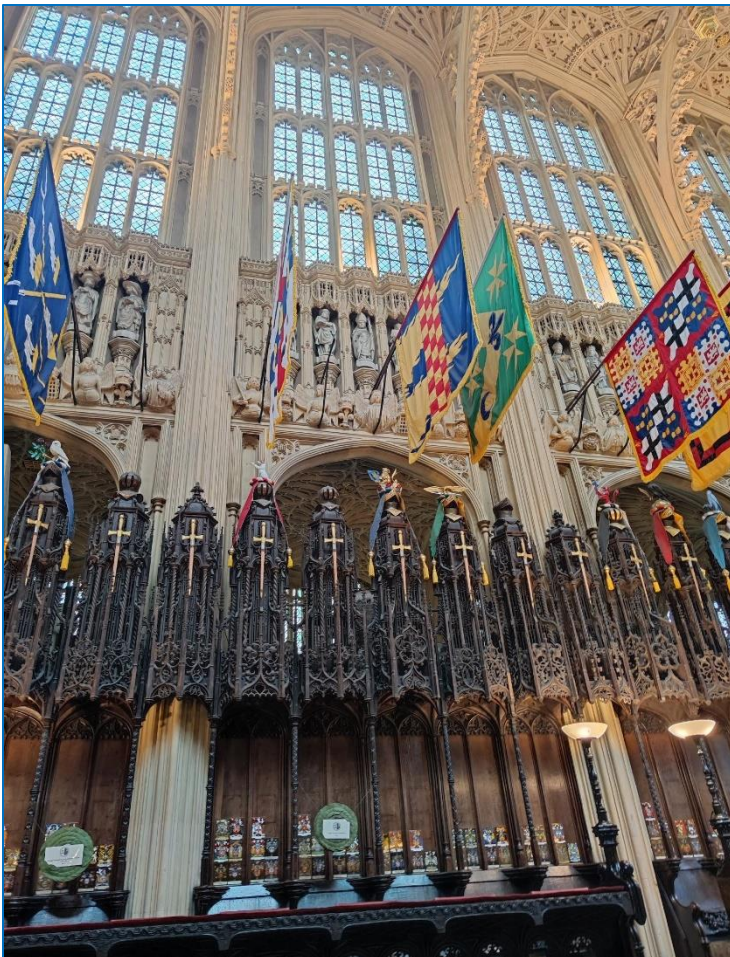
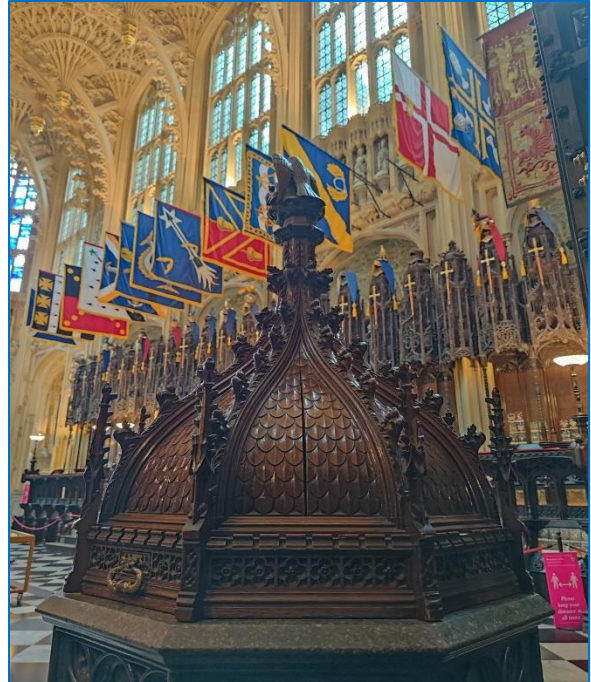
Henry's wooden effigy was originally silver-plated, with solid silver hands and head. Some of this decoration vanished during the Wars of the Roses, his head and hands were stolen in 1546 and for centuries one of England's greatest kings was reduced to a simple oaken torso. In 1971 he received a new head, made of polyester resin based on contemporary descriptions.





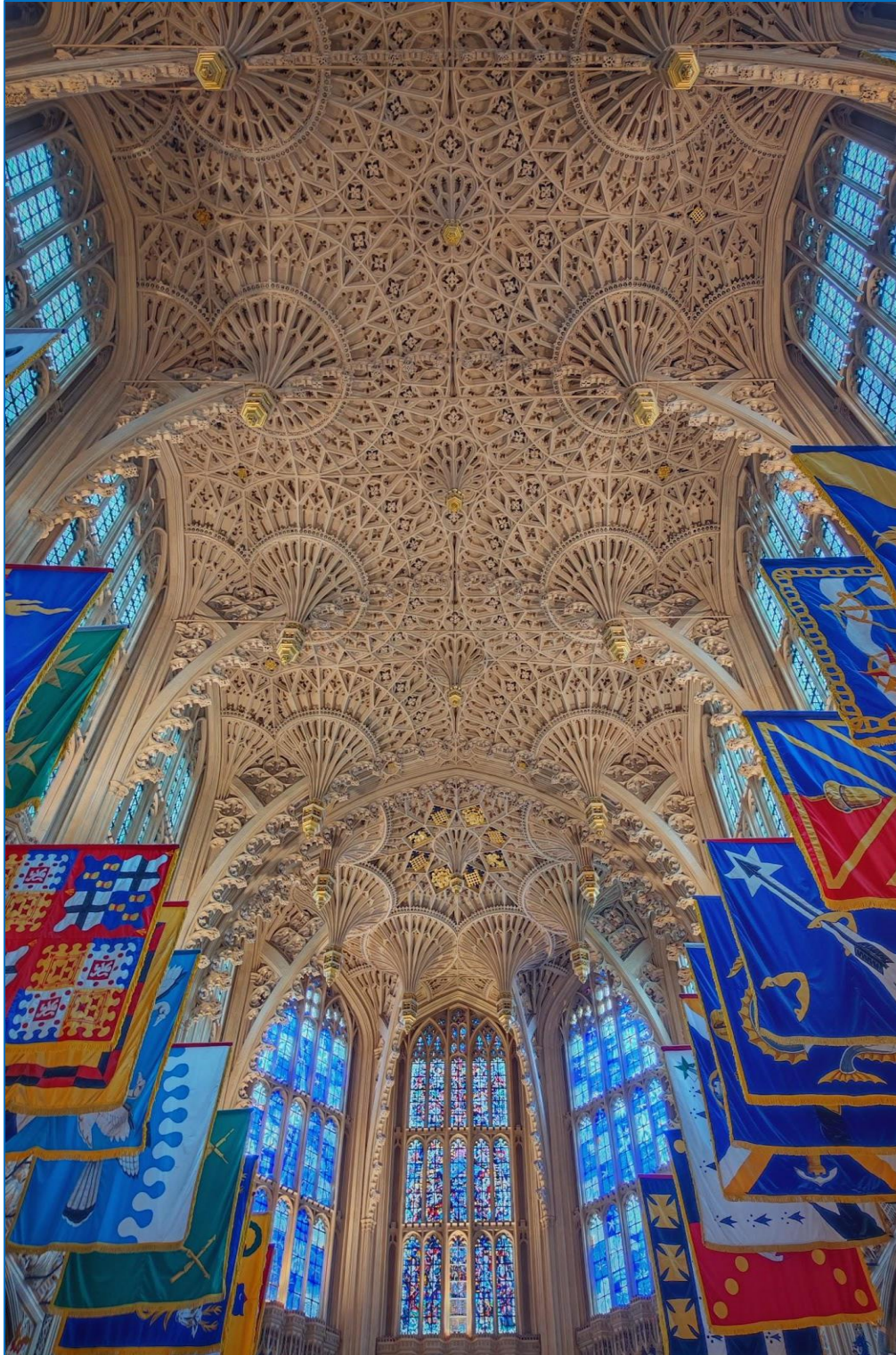
Directly opposite the tomb of Henry V is the entrance to the Lady Chapel. It is now more commonly called the Henry VII Chapel, after the king who began the construction of what is possibly the high-point of English late-Gothic architecture. It's difficult to overstate what an exceptional space this is and I felt a great sense of privilege to be able to spend a relatively undisturbed half an hour in the chapel, taking nearly 100 photographs in the process.

The chapel is the “mother church” of the Order of the Bath, a chivalric order founded in 1725, and the banners, helmets and swords of the incumbents adorn the 32 stalls on each side, with stall-plates of former members providing the continuity.



Occupying the triforium above the stalls, bookended by perpendicular blind-tracery and continuing around the whole chapel is a series of 95 statues of saints, each sitting in an elaborate niche. In this image we can see two Old Testament patriarchs in the first bay, St Martin and St Giles in the next bay and St Erasmus and St Edmund in the third bay. Together, this set makes up the most complete set of medieval statuary in England - that only 12 were lost during the Reformation and Civil War is close to miraculous.





Rightly, the most celebrated feature of the chapel is its ceiling, deserving of an entire article itself. It is fan-vaulted, with hanging pendants which not only provide striking decoration, helping to conceal the transverse arches but serve as structural reinforcement too, a trick borrowed from the earlier lierne-vaulted ceiling of the Divinity School at Oxford.

The height of the ceiling allows for tall windows in the Perpendicular style to let light flood into the chapel. This is

in stark contrast to the Abbey itself which, thanks to its relatively small clerestory windows, feels much darker than other churches of a similar size.





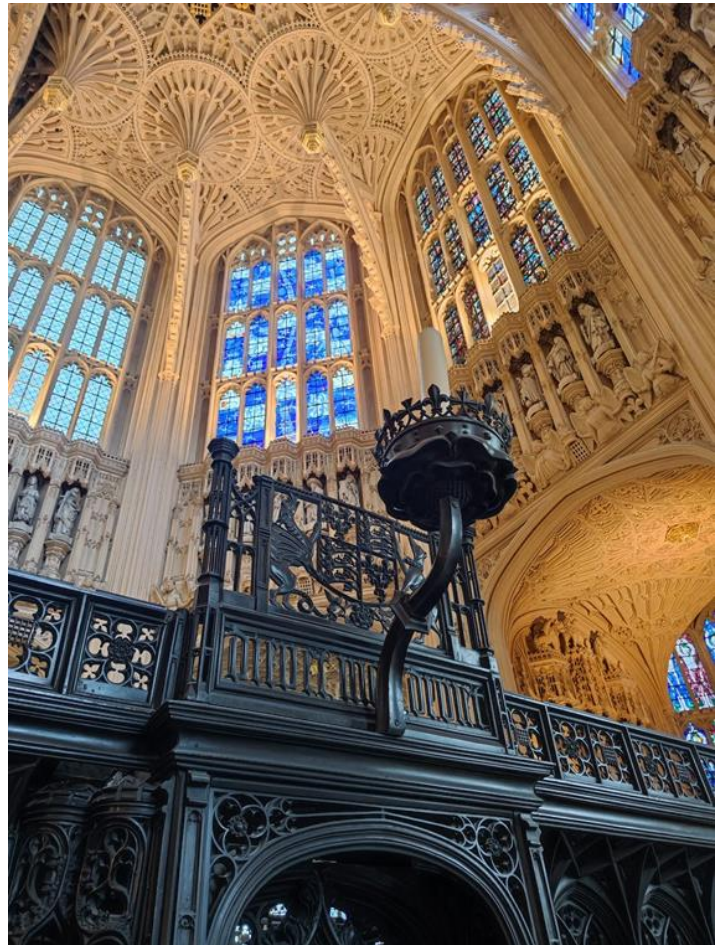




Pietro Torrigiano was a Florentine artist who, according to tradition, was so enraged by the talent of his contemporary Michelangelo he struck him in a violent rage, breaking his nose and earning banishment. Apocryphal or not, Torrigiano arrived in England in the early 16th century and is credited with bringing Renaissance sensibilities to a country still clinging on to the last vestiges of Gothic.

The tomb of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York is undoubtedly a Renaissance masterpiece, though it is enclosed within a bronze screen that is firmly Gothic in its implementation. Six original figures remain in the many niches found in the screen, including this depiction of John the Evangelist.

Above the entrance to the tomb itself is the motto “Dieu et mon droit” and above this the royal arms of three lions and three fleurs-de-lys. Protruding from this section are large, crowned Tudor roses, a motif which dominates both the screen and the memorial within.







The effigies of Elizabeth and Henry are of gilded bronze and rest on a slab of black marble above a white frieze of putti, acanthus leaves and Tudor roses. A cherub sits on each corner: once these would have held banners.

On both sides of the tomb are three gilded medallions depicting two of Henry's favorite saints. Tudor roses also feature heavily in the carved wreaths which surround the medallions, as well as being in each corner of the panels that house the medallions, and on the columns dividing the panels. This medallion shows Mary holding the infant Jesus, while St Michael is shown trampling on the devil.

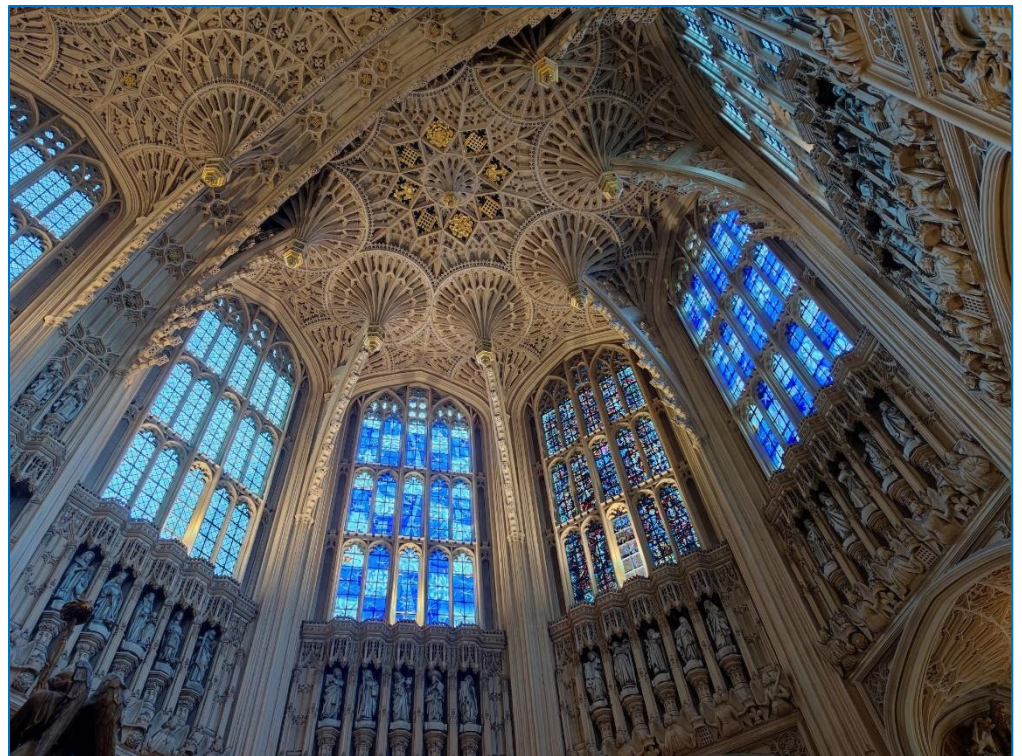






The cherubs at the foot of the tomb are holding the royal arms, encircled by the emblem of the Order of the Garter. Below this are two winged putti, supporting the arms of Henry and Elizabeth.

The east end of the chapel provides us with a view of a quirk of the ceiling that, once noticed, is difficult to forget. As the chapel forms into a polygonal apse the pendants get closer together and a double-rib is needed to provide support to the pendants either side. Continuity is broken somewhat, but it is a necessary conceit to keep the ceiling in place.











Exiting the Lady Chapel and moving into the north ambulatory provides an opportunity for a better look at the ‘bridge’ which forms the exterior of Henry V’s chantry. In the spandrels are angels supporting shields bearing Henry’s arms. Above this is a frieze of chained swans and

antelopes, with the central image of a king’s coronation. The chained swan was a device of the de Bohun family, becoming a royal symbol through Henry’s mother, Mary de Bohun.

The memorial to Lewis Robessart forms a large part of the screen of St Paul’s Chapel. Robessart was a capable soldier, loyal servant to Henry V and VI and a Garter Knight whose adherence to the order’s rules forbade him from retreating in battle. As such, he was killed in 1430 during a minor skirmish with French and Scottish forces at Conty, though he saved his men by telling them to flee when the battle was lost.

Aside from its size, and the somewhat fanciful modern paint job, his memorial is notable as being one of the earliest to prominently display the garter emblem, which surrounds the shields on the side of the tomb itself.



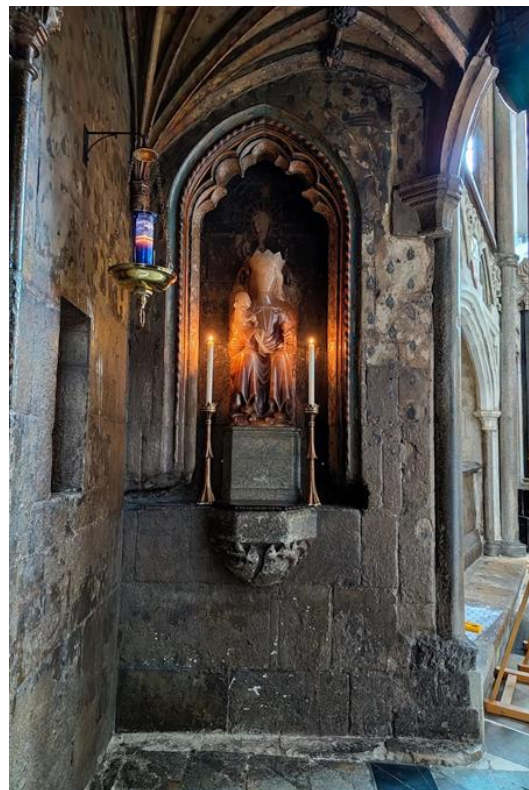


As the driving force behind the cult of Edward the Confessor and great benefactor to the Abbey itself, Henry III is deserving of having the most spectacular tomb of those royals who surround the



Confessor's Chapel. Its elaborate pedestal has lost many of its mosaics to souvenir hunters over the centuries, but still retains enough decoration to give an impression as to how grand it would have appeared. The chest above has Solomonic columns at the corners and a huge slab of porphyry in the center. Henry's effigy, not visible from the ground but shown in the photograph taken from the gallery, was by William Torel, who also produced the effigy of Eleanor of Castile. The mosaic work was by "Peter the Roman," who also decorated the pavement of the Confessor's Chapel, and Edward's shrine itself.

The tiny Chapel of Our Lady of Pew has a little medieval wall decoration, but the alabaster statue of the Virgin and Child is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century interpretation of a 15<sup>th</sup>-century example at Westminster Cathedral.







Outside the chapel is a rather-sweet, feathered angel, the shield depicting the combined arms of England and France means it must be mid-14th century or later. The door mold also retains some early polychromy.

The tombs of Edmund Crouchback (l) and Aymer de Valence (r) are two of my favorites in the abbey. Edmund, younger brother of Edward I, has the earlier and grander tomb, resting below a vaulted canopy of three bays, with ten weepers on each side.

Aymer was the son of William de Valence, so a cousin of Crouchback, and there is more than a passing resemblance to their memorials, though de Valence died nearly 30 years later. This passage of time is perhaps reflected in the execution of the tombs. Though that of Crouchback is undeniably the more impressive, to me de Valence's tomb is executed with more confidence. The ogee form of the cinquefoil arches and the foliated spandrels elevate it slightly, but as a pair these are perhaps the most spectacular Gothic tombs I have seen.





The early 16th century pulpit where Archbishop Thomas Cranmer is alleged to have delivered the sermon at Edward VI's coronation in 1547 is found next to a column by the nave altar. Cranmer was a supporter of Lady Jane Grey's claim to the crown and a fervent Protestant, and when Mary came to the throne his position became untenable, leading to his grisly execution and subsequent martyrdom.

This image also demonstrates an interesting quirk of Westminster Abbey's nave. The spandrels above the arch in the bay next to the nave screen have a diapered pattern, those in the bay next to it do not. This marks the spot where construction of Henry III's nave stopped upon his death in 1272, restarting again in 1376 to the same design, but with a slightly more austere decoration.





The view west from the nave is impeded by the Quire screen of 1831 but, looking up at the gloriously high ceiling, the highest Gothic vault in England at nearly 102 feet, one is able to spot another indication of the newer section of the nave.

The vaults in Henry's nave were decorated with darker bands of stone, and the ceiling bosses have a floral pattern around them. The western section of the nave, completed under the direction of Abbot Nicholas Litlington, dispenses with such ornamentation.



The crossing tower has long been a source of controversy and plans for a 'proper' spire to be added still get mentioned from time to time. While in itself, a squat, unadorned tower is not particularly uncommon, Winchester Cathedral springs to mind, the sheer height of the vaults at Westminster give the tower a somewhat disproportionate look from the outside.



Inside however it's a different story. This view, taken directly beneath the tower, shows the continuity of the design and you can follow the shafts of the great Purbeck columns up, around the arch and back down again.



From here the view back to the north transept shows five distinct stages to the internal elevation. The first level, including the main entrance, is topped by spandrels with reliefs including the Samson and lion shown earlier. Next is a six-bay blind arcade, with trefoil arches, which is level with the piers of the arcades of the transept aisles. The third stage, the top of which aligns with the points of the transept bay arches, is a row of six lancet windows from the





20th century, which replaced windows damaged in World War II. Above this is a triforium at the level of the galleries, the outer spandrels containing carved angels swinging a censer; the foliate middle spandrels have corbels but the sculptures that should be here are conspicuous by their absence. Finally, there is a rose window containing glass from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which was needlessly altered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Looking right to the south transept provides a much more satisfying view. The windows in the third stage, though shorter in height than those in the north transept, finish in a trefoiled head which add to the coherence of the elevation. Above another row of windows, completely absent from the north transept, provides a much-needed clerestory while the rose window above, though still modern, has been executed much more successfully.



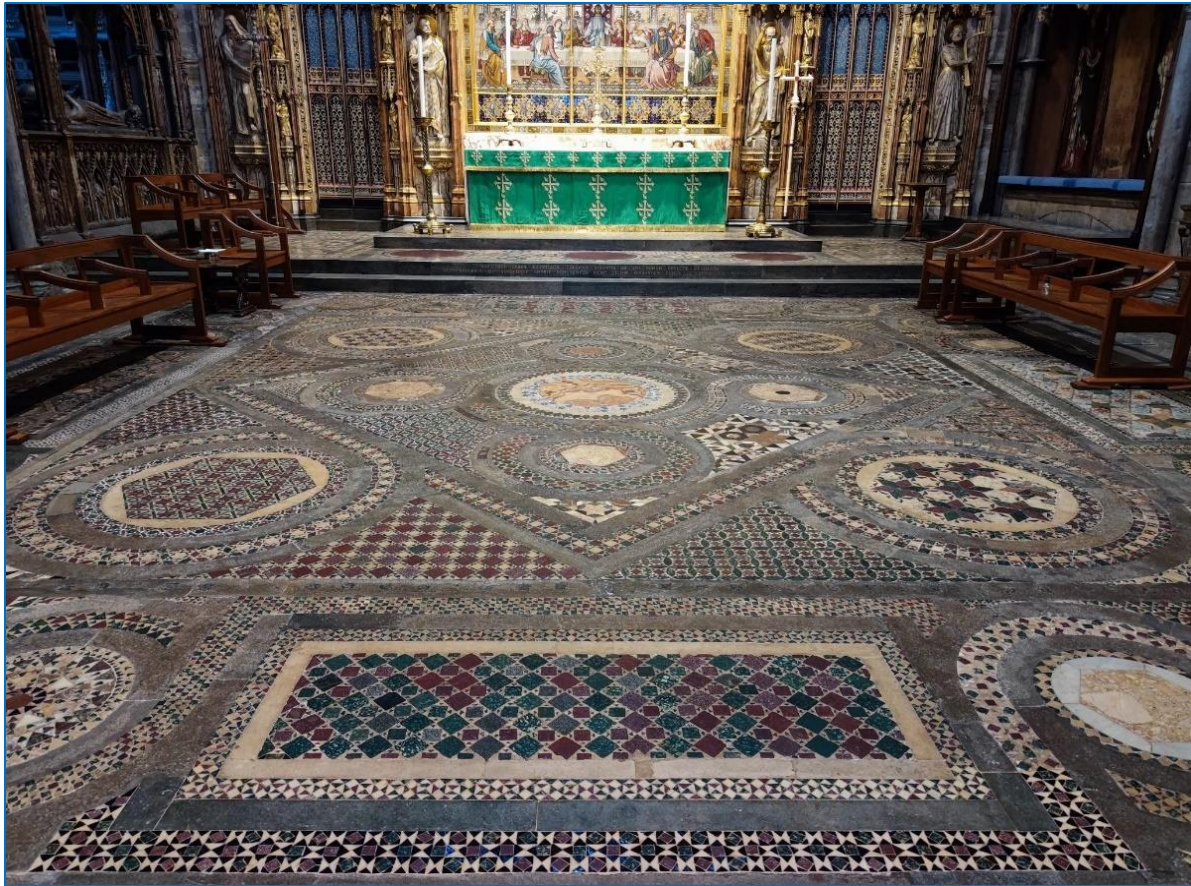
I was able to get a closer look at the clerestory from the gallery, and unlike in the north transept, the statuary in the central spandrels remains, though unfortunately the nearest figure to me had lost its head and arms. What is also very obvious from this photo, and is actually noticeable throughout the Abbey, is the inconsistency of the diapering in the spandrels. In some it goes into the points while in others whole rows seem to be missing.



Along with the Confessor's Chapel and the Henry VII Chapel the other feature for which Westminster Abbey is rightly famous is the "Cosmatesque Pavement" found in the Presbytery. The mosaic method was perfected by the Cosmati family *c.*1200 and a number of students of the workshop, including the master Odoricus, were shipped from Rome with materials including purple porphyry, green serpentine and yellow limestone.

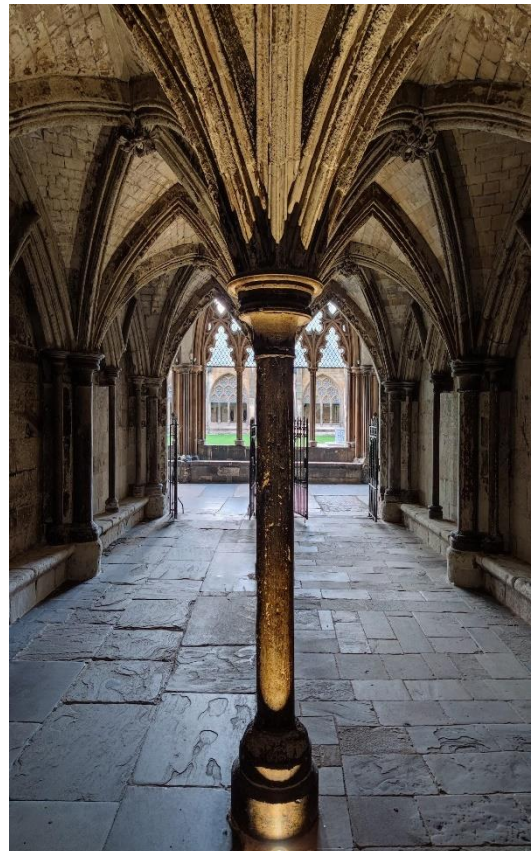
In a departure from Cosmatesque works in Italy, the smaller mosaic pieces are set into a bed of Purbeck marble, as opposed to the usual marble. After being suffocated under a





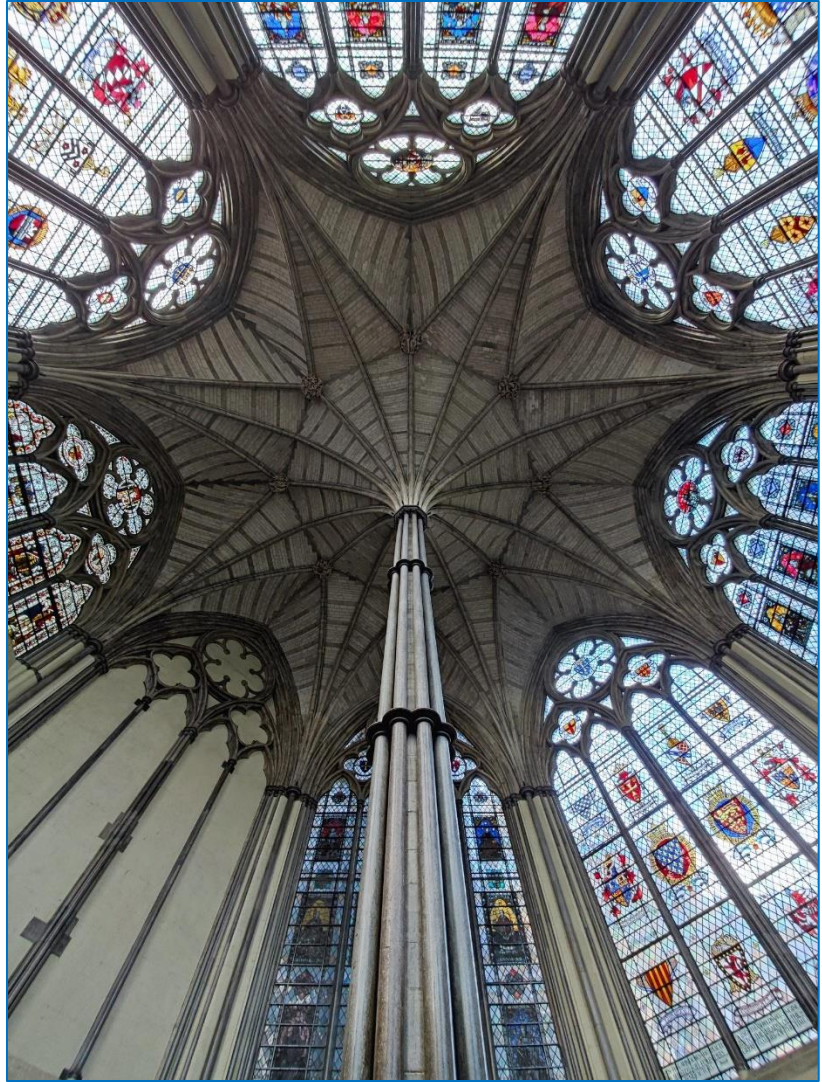
“protective” carpet for the best part of 150 years, the pavement underwent a significant restoration which completed in 2010.

Sadly, most of the cloisters were closed, but I was able to walk to the Chapter House. It is accessed via a vaulted vestibule from the east cloisters featuring central pillars which form two aisles.





Completed in 1255, during Henry III's rebuilding, the Chapter House served as a place for up to 80 monks to meet, sit and discuss the teachings of St Benedict. In an echo of the columns in the vestibule, there is a central column leading up to a magnificent, vaulted ceiling, and seven of the eight sides feature tall windows making this, like the Henry VII chapel, a very light space.



There are a number of significant medieval features of the Chapter House, not least of which is the tile pavement, this time not Cosmatesque but made in the encaustic fashion that is much more typical of the time.





Probably the most important survival in the Chapter House is the impressive set of wall paintings, most of which are still in exceptional condition. There are two main series, the first has a number of representations of Christ in Majesty, and the second, with some slightly less well-preserved panels, has a Last Judgement.

Having had the opportunity to explore Westminster Abbey at my own pace, without the encumbrance of hordes of tourists I am convinced that it is well deserving of its status among the most important grand medieval churches in England.

In fact, there may be an element of reverse-snobbery in the perceptions of some towards the Abbey. It's certainly

ubiquitous in the British national consciousness, and serving the twin masters of religion and tourism does undoubtedly leave a certain taste in the mouth.

The presence of the royal tombs alone gives it a unique position, and the concentration of medieval survivals in the form of paintings, tiling and statuary is certainly the most significant I have seen. 🐼

